

March 27. The Bird

*But it isn't nothing,
to know even one moment alive,*
—Ellen Bass

as in this plague year
five of us are Skyping
or WhatsApping each other

every day across three continents
although there are few swerves in the news,

as the death toll
hits 24,000 and the hollowness

of our president battens and battens.
At the drug store, though,

the man behind you on line
takes a gracious dance step-and-a-half back,

and tilts his head, whimsical, dead
serious, and amused, and on Donlon Street

Twawee Twawee
wa wa wa wa wow!

the pitch and beat of an unseen bird
sounding its coloratura shofar

in call and response cadence,
amused (too?), as it easily outdoes

my dry-lipped whistly strivings,
as if the natural world we despoil so casually

feels a large kindness towards us
all which it cannot suppress.

May 21. Hunger 1

Consider your so-called life, Corona Virus 2019,
that is, if your hemming and hawing between
stolen life and pre-life, stolen life and pre-life,
can be dignified by that term. Sure, there are
adjectives we living beings are driven
to apply to you: rapacious, single-minded,
flexible, dogged, but that's just how we are,
driven to deny the nothing that is not there,
while you, like a snowman, do not see a thing.

The truth is you've become yesterday's news
as our poor nation foolishly rushes to open
and the grand old American sport of lynching
black men slips out from dark crevices into noontime light,

though, as our people gather in protest,
it's too easy to imagine you gloating as we teem,
flesh pressed to flesh in our masks,
as you foresee a grand comeback and I
feel compelled to concede
that along the junctures that hook together
the minute threads of stuff
that make you what you are,
there must be found, if not life,
at least some dogged and primordial
desire to be alive.

June 4: Hunger 2

It's hard not to call it hungry
this insidious malignancy built
or designed or self-created to work
its magic down among the deepest
alveoli where it can wreak its most thorough
havoc and replicate without limit.

But where in it is located,
this hunger? Is it like my own hunger
which often comes upon me
suddenly when I've come up for air
after some long immersion—in writing
reading watching planting, and is that
hunger so different from a teenager's
or the "too hungry" Piper Laurie identifies
in Paul Newman or that of an amoeba
enveloping and absorbing whatever speck
of nourishment happens to come its way?

But on its own this infinitesimal strand
of nucleic acid is not even alive, unlike us,
whether hungry for food or power or love
or sex or a cold drink or a pat
on the back—is this hunger
to become a living being
rudimentary or foundational
or simply Other? Is it
like a newborn's first breath
or its opposite?

June 19. Against Transformation

She lay there in her own bedroom in a hospital bed,
diminished, barely responding to word or touch,
occasional instants of lucidity scattered on her silence,
the visiting hospice nurse having recognized
and announced that this is a “new stage,” a “crash,”
and that the son in England should come right away.

Masked, we stand at the foot of the bed,
you touching her foot as the daughter, all patience,
cajoles a sip or two of water. The image is recalcitrant.
It simply will not budge. Frail as she is,
all the forces of remembrance are impotent
to produce and sustain even a translucent superposition

of how she once was, say, lifting a whole leg of lamb
from oven to serving plate on Passover
and hauling it to the kitchen table to be carved,

that image from long ago bursting into flames
in the mind before being consumed, edges first,
like a piece of movie film projected onto a screen,
curling up, melting, dissolving, revealing beneath it
the powerful and frail body, thin limbs
moving listlessly, the shallowest of breaths.

June 25. Litany

Whether you woke at 6:00 am, somehow tuned to the final breath of our friend, as Ann woke across the continent at 3:00, I don't know. Whether the dying woman heard any of us, husband, daughter, son, friends of fifty years, speaking tenderly, inches from her ear, of first meetings and plays, fiascos and dinners and Entenmann's, during what we now know was her last day, I don't know. Whether the haphazard motion of her arms and legs and whispered no's the day before that were signs of discomfort, pain, despair, or something else entirely, I have no idea. I still have a hankering for the notion that there is some connection between how a life is lived and how it ends, a drop of meaning perhaps, even revelation or virtue, despite the lesson of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or Covid-19, that there is no connection at all unless it's to teach us the horror and folly of dragging our most intimate private needs and passions, Lear-like, into the arenas of public life, and I remember, six months ago. We were walking with our friend in a park by the water, when suddenly her legs were giving way and it took all the strength we could muster between us to keep her from falling again. That was the moment our bodies first registered the seriousness of her decline, which we did know.